

Educational Web Site Takes You to Every State Historic Park

Text and Photos by Bill Carey

Kids don't seem to be learning as much about Tennessee history these days.

If you have a school-age child, or know one, you may already have learned this through experience.

In fact, it's not just Tennessee history that's lacking. It's Tennessee civics. Tennessee geography. The very awareness that students are from Tennessee.

Fortunately, there's a new weapon in the battle for Tennessee history, courtesy of the Internet and a Nashville-based not for profit entity. The organization is called Tennessee History for Kids; its free Web site can be found at www.tnhistoryforkids.org.



Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park.

Photo by Bill Carey

Two years ago the Tennessee History for Kids Web site was being used by a handful of teachers. A year ago, a more accurate number was 300. Today more than 4,000 social studies teachers regularly use Tennessee History for Kids, making it, quite possibly, the number one source of Tennessee history information for young people today (keep in mind that Tennessee's public schools do not provide Tennessee history books to its students).

Teachers and parents who use the site swear by it.

"I love using Tennessee History for Kids!" says Melissa Alexander, a fifth grade teacher at Chester County Middle School. "The Web site is extremely user-friendly and contains a plethora of information. I use it for regular lessons in the classroom, for projects in the computer lab, and I even tell my husband some of the fun facts."

Rhonda Watts, the computer lab facilitator at Jefferson Elementary School in Jefferson City, says her students "love" Tennessee History for Kids. "Every time I let my fourth graders on the page, they get excited and can't stop talking about all the things that they learned from it!" she says.

Tennessee History for Kids has received funding from a number of entities, including the administration of Governor Phil Bredesen, the Tennessee Department of Education, the Bridgestone/Firestone Trust Fund, the Frist Foundation and others. And last year, Tennessee History for Kids received a small grant from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to put together on-line virtual tours of Tennessee's 13 state historic parks. These tours approach each state historic park from the eyes of a child – explaining the who, what, where, when and why of places ranging from Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park to Fort Pillow State Historic Park.

Sometimes the descriptions are light-hearted. "Port Royal [State Historic Park] is a great place to enjoy the oldest sport in Tennessee — pebble throwing," says one of the tours. "Here's a young visitor carrying on the tradition."

More often than not, however, they are quite serious.

"In 1832 things were looking grim for the Cherokee nation," begins the tour of Red Clay State Historic Park. "Stripped of their rights in the state of Georgia, members of the tribe moved their seat of government from New Echota in Northwest Georgia to Red Clay, just across the Tennessee state line. But Red Clay would not be the Cherokee capital for long. Only six years later the tribe would be sent west on a journey we now know as the Trail of Tears."

Mike Cole, park manager at the Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park, says the Tennessee History for Kids tour has helped people learn about his park. "We've had people tell us that they found out about the park by taking the Tennessee History for Kids virtual tour, and that's why they came," says Cole.

"And I really like the way the tours are set up. They are set up to show a person exactly what they'll encounter when they get here."

Jane Polansky, park manager at the Harpeth River State Park, describes the Tennessee History for Kids site as "phenomenal."

"I send people to it all the time and use it as a reference," Polansky says. "I'll have kids call us and ask us about the park, and I'll send them to Tennessee History for Kids."

Unlike a lot of educational Web sites, Tennessee History for Kids is set up with the state's specific curriculum in mind. This may sound simple. But in an era in which Tennessee history, civics and geography are scattered throughout seven different grades (2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, and 12), it is extremely difficult for parents and teachers to know which destinations are appropriate for which year. For example, early American history is covered in Grades 4 and 8. Late American history is addressed in Grades 5 and 11. Grade 2 is the year students are supposed to learn very basic things about Tennessee, such as the name of the governor, the appearance of the flag, the definition of taxes, etc. Grade 7 is a geography grade. And Grade 12 is the year students are supposed to learn about how government works.

The Tennessee History for Kids organization also maintains a constant presence at teacher-related events and conferences, such as the Tennessee Council for the Social Studies, the Tennessee Reading Association and various in-services. The idea behind this marketing effort is to continually get the word out about the free Web site.

Excerpts From Tennessee History for Kids' Virtual Tours

(To take these and other tours, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org, then click on "Virtual Tours" down the left column.)

- Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park: "The Bicentennial Mall is legally considered an extension of the Tennessee State Capitol grounds. That's why the flags at the top of the flagpole here are Tennessee flags, not American flags. And, speaking of flags, you will notice that there are two large flags and 16 smaller flags on the south end of the mall. The two large flags represent the state's 200th birthday; the 16 smaller flags represent the fact that Tennessee was the 16th state admitted to the union. Cool, huh?"
- Cordell Hull Birthplace State Historic Park: "Across the street from the Cordell Hull Birthplace and Museum is a trail that leads to Bunkum Cave. The trail will take you about 20 or 30 minutes one way, but it's worth the hike. With an entrance measuring 100 feet wide and 50 feet high, Bunkum Cave is quite a sight. And it played an important part in the Cordell Hull story. According to family legend, Cordell Hull's father Billy made illegal moonshine in the cave before he went into the lumber business."
- Fort Loudoun State Historic Park: "In 1757 South Carolina's colonial government built a fort here called Fort Loudoun. The structure now located at the Fort Loudoun State Historic Park is an exact copy of that fort, located at the exact location of that fort. But the story of the original fort, and what happened to its inhabitants, is a harrowing one."
- Fort Pillow State Historic Park: "Fort Pillow reminds us that during time of war, horrible things happen that we can hardly imagine during time of peace. A military victory for the Confederacy, the capture of Fort Pillow is one of the most controversial and tragic engagements of the Civil War."
- Johnsonville State Historic Park: "Here, the Confederacy scored a small but dramatic military victory in the fall of 1864, going down in world military history as the only time a force of cavalry (troops on horses) defeated a naval force. When the TVA created Kentucky Lake in 1945, the Tennessee River permanently flooded its banks in this part of the state and buried most of the battlefield and the old town of Johnsonville in several feet of water. So this place looks NOTHING like it did during the Civil War."
- Old Stone Fort State Archaeological Park: "At first glance, Old Stone Fort is nothing more than a long wall surrounding a big field. But this stoned enclosure, in Manchester, is one of the most interesting places in Tennessee. The structure Native Americans built here has always been surrounded with mystery (people used to think it was haunted). In addition to the stone enclosure, the remains of a stagecoach road and several paper mills are here. And, on top of everything else, there is incredible scenery, with two rivers, cliffs, and several waterfalls. Let's get started!"
- Pinson Mounds State Archaeological Park: "The people who built Pinson Mounds appear to have been knowledgeable about astronomy (the study and movement of the sun, moon and stars). If you stand on top of Saul's Mound on the Spring Equinox (March 21) and the Fall Equinox (September 21) and watch the sunrise, you will notice that it rises directly behind Mound 29. Many archaeologists believe that this is not a coincidence; after all, other mounds sites in the world from this time period are arranged with astronomy in mind. One common theory is that ceremonies occurred during Spring Equinox (related to planting) and Fall Equinox (related to harvesting)."
- Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park: "Settler Richard Henderson wanted to negotiate with the Cherokee for the purchase of the land that now makes up Middle Tennessee and much of Kentucky. Henderson sent word for Cherokee leaders to meet him at Sycamore Shoals. The story of those negotiations (known as the Transylvania Purchase) is told in our fourth grade and eighth grade text. To summarize, the Cherokee leaders sold the land in exchange for gifts. But Dragging Canoe, son of the Cherokee chief Attakullakulla, disagreed. After warning that there would be deadly fighting over the land purchased that day, he and his followers stormed away from the negotiations."

(Bill Carey is a former journalist, the author of six Nashville history books and the founder of Tennessee History for Kids.)